

Local news Tuesday, January 10, 2006

Official lauds Bliss, urges EP to support it

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Secretary of the Army Francis J. Harvey on Monday said Fort Bliss is No. 1 in military value in the nation and that El Paso must work to provide high quality education -- from kindergarten to university -- in support of thousands of soldiers coming to the post as part of realignment and modernization efforts.

Harvey, who answered questions from the media during a visit to Fort Bliss, also said the Future Combat Systems program -- criticized by some in Congress as too large and too expensive -- is central to the Army's modernization and has a solid core of support on Capitol Hill.

The Army announced last week it will locate a 3,500- soldier combat team at Fort Bliss that will test and evaluate cutting-edge technology developed in the Future Combat Systems program.

Also on Monday, officials with Future Combat Systems lead contractors Boeing and Science Applications International Corp., announced they expect to open a regional office at the El Paso Boeing facility in February. The office will employ "several hundred people," and an additional 35 people will be at Fort Bliss to support the combat team, Boeing officials said.

By 2008, about 300 people will be working on the project, said Dennis Muilenburg, Boeing vice president/general manager, and Future Combat Systems program manager.

Harvey said the Army plans to expand the Fort Bliss population by nearly 25,000 soldiers because the post has the highest military value in the nation.

"We had an elaborate evaluation process to establish military value," Harvey said of the Base Realignment and Closure process that concluded last year. "The reason we're doing this (sending units) is because Fort Bliss is the most capable base in the Army."

Fort Bliss' strengths include training and maneuver space, air space and an available frequency spectrum that allows radio communication and testing of other systems, he said.

Later in the day, Harvey had a private meeting with school superintendents whose districts will be most affected by the influx of soldiers and their dependents.

"My No. 1 priority is the welfare of soldiers and their families," Harvey said. "We expect our soldiers to be given a first-class education and to have opportunities for housing."

"As a Secretary of the Army I will be very, very satisfied" if El Paso continues to invest in its education infrastructure and to improve the quality of its educational opportunities, he said, which will be necessary to "sustain" the all-volunteer military.

Despite the criticism, Harvey said Future Combat Systems is an "essential part of fighting the war on terrorism. ... It's absolutely critical to the future of the Army." He said Congress will continue to fund Future Combat Systems in fiscal year 2007.

The Future Combat Systems program uses satellites, unmanned aerial vehicles, armed robotic vehicles, unattended munitions and other technology connected by a unified communications system to provide real-time battlefield information to the smallest units in the field. It is expected to make the Army more agile and more lethal.

Muilenburg said Future Combat Systems testing at Fort Bliss will "minimize cost and risk" because the equipment won't have to go through cycles of field testing with active units. Rather, the evaluation will be done with the input of soldiers who are using the equipment at Fort Bliss who can quickly catch problems.

"It allows us to get soldier feedback early in the process," Muilenburg said.

Valori Bring, Boeing program director for production and spin outs, said the office will have about five people to start with and then ramp up to about 300 by 2008. The employees will be engineers as well as administrators and the total includes people working with the Army's Training and Doctrine Command at Fort Bliss and at White Sands Missile Range.

Although economic impact numbers aren't available yet, Muilenburg said the \$21 billion Future Combat Systems program already has dozens of sites around the country employing about 6,500 people.

"And now there's going to be a substantial portion of that development that will be done at Fort Bliss in El Paso and at White Sands Missile Range," Muilenburg said. "This is the first step in what we expect to be a very successful journey."

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